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By Amanda Radke



Is Meat The Best Brain Food?

Amanda Radke | May 16, 2013

The old adage, “Work smarter, not harder,” holds true for many successful ranchers I know. However, while most work incredibly hard

24/7, 365 days/year, and have to in order to be successful, those who truly reap the rewards of ranching are working a lot smarter, too.

Did you know that even though our brain is only about 2% of our body weight, it uses 20% of our energy? When I'm thinking hard about the countless management decisions that need to be made in our operation each day, I want to fuel my brain with the best . That's why I turn to animal foods.

AuthorityNutrition.com is a website that helps people make informed decisions about their health based on the best scientific evidence available. In a recent article, Kris Gunnars, a medical student and personal trainer lists the five brain nutrients that are only found in meat, fish and eggs, but not plants. While I encourage you to go read the entire article, as it offers some great information, here is that top five list of nutrients for the brain that can be obtained only from eating animal-based foods.

1. Vitamin B12

Gunnar writes, “Did you know that not a single population in the history of the world has ever willingly adopted a vegan diet ? That's because before the era of supplements, such a dietary shift would have started killing people within a few years. The most well known vitamin that the body can't produce, and can only be gotten from animal foods, is Vitamin B12. The only good food sources of B12 are animal foods like meat, fish and eggs. A deficiency is widespread among vegans and vegetarians, who avoid these foods. In one study, a whopping 92% of vegans and 47% of lacto-ovo vegetarians were deficient in this critical brain nutrient. Being deficient in B12 can cause irreversible damage to the brain. If your levels are just slightly lower than they should be, you may have symptoms like poor memory, depression and fatigue.”

2. Creatine

Gunnar explains, “Every athlete, bodybuilder and gym enthusiast knows about creatine. It is the most popular muscle-building supplement in the world, for good reason. Scientific studies consistently show that creatine supplementation can increase muscle mass and strength . The same way that our muscles require energy to do work, our brain needs energy to do various things like thinking. Creatine is an important nutrient in muscle and the brain that helps to supply energy. Studies show that vegetarians have a deficiency in creatine that leads to adverse effects on muscle and brain function.”

3. Vitamin D3

The “sunshine vitamin” is next on the list. Gunnar says, “Many people live where sun is basically absent throughout most of the year. But even in countries where sun is abundant, people tend to stay inside and use sunscreen when they go outside. There are two main forms of Vitamin D in the diet: Vitamin D2 (ergocalciferol) and D3 (cholecalciferol). D2 comes from plants, D3 from animals. Studies show that D3 is much more effective than the plant form. There are few good sources of Vitamin D3 in the diet. Cod fish liver oil is the best source. Fatty fish also contains some D3, but you’d have to eat massive amounts of it to satisfy your body’s need. A deficiency in Vitamin D is linked to all sorts of diseases, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, Multiple Sclerosis, depression and cognitive impairment.”

4. Carnosine

Fourth on the list is Carnosine, which Gunnar say is a very important nutrient that many have probably never heard of.

“The prefix Carno- is the latin term for meat or flesh, like Carni-vore

(meat eater). It is strictly found in animal tissues, meaning that vegans and vegetarians aren't getting much, if any, from the diet. Carnosine is created out of two amino acids and is highly concentrated in both muscle tissue and brain. This substance is very protective against various degenerative processes in the body. It is a potent antioxidant, inhibits glycation caused by elevated blood sugars, and may prevent cross-linking of proteins. For this reason, Carnosine has become very popular as an anti-aging supplement. Carnosine levels are significantly lower in patients with various brain disorders, including Parkinson's and Alzheimer's – the two most common neurodegenerative disorders. Many researchers have speculated that animal foods may protect the brain and body against aging due to their large amount of carnosine.”

5. Docosahexaenoic Acid (DHA)

Finally, Gunnar lists DHA, explaining, “Everyone concerned with nutrition knows that Omega-3 fatty acids are extremely important. The human body cannot make them, therefore we must get them from the diet. This is why Omega-3s (and Omega-6s) are termed “essential” fatty acids – if we don't eat them, we get sick. There are two active forms of Omega-3s in the body, EPA and DHA. DHA is the most abundant Omega-3 fatty acid in the brain and it is critical for normal brain development. Low intakes of DHA can adversely affect various aspects of cognitive function and mental health, especially in children . It is also very important for women at a childbearing age, because a woman's Omega-3 status can have profound effects on the brain of the offspring. The best source of DHA is fatty fish. Other good sources include grass-fed and pastured animal products.”

The bottom-line, Gunnar concludes, is to, “just eat some animals.”

“Humans evolved eating both animals and plants. However, we can

function in some cases without either. The Inuit, for example, survived mostly without plants, but they had to compensate by eating lots of organ meats. In the 21st century, people can survive and function without animal foods if they make sure to supplement with critical nutrients. Before the era of supplementation, completely removing animal foods would have led to a slow and painful death due to B12 deficiency. But even though functioning without either plants or animals is possible, neither is optimal. In the same way that a meat-based diet is healthier with a little bit of plants, a plant-based diet is healthier with a little bit of animals.”

I must note that I share such articles not because I’m a nutritionist, but because health and wellness is of great interest to me, particularly because of my busy lifestyle -- writing and ranching certainly keeps me busy. I can bet that as soon as this blog is posted, I will get negative comments about how I should stick to ranching and leave the nutrition side alone, but I believe it’s important to read studies on how to be a healthier person. And, as a rancher, it’s crucial that I keep an eye on consumer trends and perceptions about the beef I produce.

I must also add that I’m not aiming to pit meat-eaters against vegetarians and vegans . In fact, Gunnar lists the supplements that individuals should take to round out their plant-based diets, and if that’s your case, I encourage you to check out the entire article. My goal with sharing these pro-beef blogs is to offer a science-based perspective on the healthfulness of eating beef , and hope it alleviates some concerns the general consumer might feel about including animal products in their diet. No, I’m not a doctor, but I can speak from experience. Animal proteins in my diet helps to fuel my brain, and I’m pleased to see studies and articles that support that.

I would love to hear your thoughts on this article. Please join the discussion by sharing your opinions in the comments section below. I

look forward to a lively conversation and find the discussion fascinating. so I encourage you to stop back to see what others are saying about these brain foods!

Feel free to share this, as well! Let's spread the word that animal food is the perfect fuel for our brains!

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